

St Pius & St Anthony 4th Sunday Easter Year B2 (John 10:11-18)

Hearing about the calling of shepherds and their knowing their own sheep, or even naming them, made me remember that I was blessed one time to be able to have an actual field-sheep named after me. It happened many years ago. As some background to this, I was close to a family, and the father of the house knew that I was from Daviess County (home of Moonlight BBQ, but also Old Hickory, & Ole South, but also legacy places Shady Rest, Southside, Pogues, etc) You can't be from Daviess County and not love mutton! But anyway, this family farmed, and had chickens & goats but also raised sheep. Visiting one time, their daughter shared the good news with me, that with the recent birth of some lambs at their farm, they named one of them 'Brian'! Hey, awesome-that's a first! A sheep named after me! So, I wanted to be responsible to check in on my namesake from time to time – to see how he was doing. So every time I saw them, I'd ask, "How is Brian behaving? Do I need to come have a talk with him?" Often, the answer was 'Yes-come talk to him - Brian been taking the other sheep's food" or "Brian bothers the other sheep" or "Brian hangs out by the gate-trying to slip out." But I stay interested in him and kept in touch. Well now, flash to the end, (really), after mass, I was having dinner one time with them, and of course I am going to ask, so I said, "Hey, how is Brian doing, is he getting along better with the other sheep, joining in their sheep games?" The oddest thing happened, that after I asked, she kept her head down eating like she didn't hear me. That wasn't usual – she was a bubbly personality. I didn't know if her mother/father heard me or not, so I asked again differently, "I guess Brian finally calmed down and outgrew his mischief?" And she still would not look up. So out of character for her as if she was ignoring me (Did I say something, or hurt feelings?) And then "Awww No" I got it, it hit me. She couldn't tell me to my face, or tell me at all --- We were eating him for dinner that night! Fried potatoes, beans, greens and lambchops! I knew previously of families who wouldn't let their children name their farm animals – and here is good case in point to the wisdom of that!

Our gospel presents us a variation on that theme. But so much better! Not about sheep being named after us, but that being sheep ourselves, **our personal Shepherd Jesus knows us so well, He calls us by name** (We are not a ticket number in someone's feed lot, or pasture pick by a tag in our ear). No, to our Shepherd Jesus, each one of us is a precious individual member of his flock (so much so that Jesus teaches a parable elsewhere in Luke 15:3-7 that even simply one of us, who might stray from His group, we will get His attention and His time for Him to come seek us out, bringing us back (saving us from 'injuring ourselves').

And not just personal, but Sacrificial, giving us His all when caring for us. Why? Because He identifies with us - we bear His name and wear His ID (Pope Francis says frequently that the good shepherd smells like his sheep – He preached that first at his first Chrism Mass homily in 2013 and has repeated it many times since) He means that the good Shepherd is close to His sheep, living right alongside the sheep but I understand that to mean the good shepherd holds his sheep close too and so there is ‘smell transfer’ onto him – I also see this closeness symbolized in the liturgical vestment piece that only popes wear called the ‘Pallium’ that is made out of **sheep wool**- the pallium fits around the neck of the pope at mass looks like a wide outer banded collar with streaming tab down the front-symbolic of sheep being carried around his neck, or again as a focus that the pope has the smell of sheep ever in front of him. But Jesus is the model Good Shepherd, and we recall (*Luke 2:8-20*) that when Jesus was born – it was in the fields - not at the inn, not the big city, but among the fielded flock (the shepherds who got the angelic message, about God’s birth, were good shepherds, faithfully out working in fields, but most importantly Jesus birth was there with them. A sign-His heart’s roots among them)

And this closeness of our Good Shepherd to us, is Jesus’ choice too. That is why he counter-positions those ‘hired hands’ who are not good shepherds– their motivation is obvious, they are working for a check – they are not attentive to sheep, but only half-engaged and at the first moment of risk, they are gone. Opposite of them, Jesus describes His good shepherding as sacrificial ‘being willing to lay down his life for his sheep’. And I like how Jesus implies that we sheep may not always listen, and He repeats that five times in the eight verses of our today’s gospel (*John 10:11-18*) But hey, He loves us! As good shepherd, Jesus’ heart is in His work, in fact all of Him is in it-His whole life. More than just giving us all we need, protecting us, tending/healing us and leading us, He also feeds us. And He goes to the length of feeding us with, best of all, **His own life**. No better feed. We call that Holy Eucharist – Jesus’ own body-blood – divine nourishment. He gives His own self to us. That is His ‘laying down of life’, that we may take it up. And this introduces that ‘eternal life’ part of being a sheep of the good shepherd. He never leaves us. He never hands us off – hired hands work for a shift and then are gone, but Jesus remains/lives with sheep – His heart/life is in His sheep. He feels with, knows and experiences everything right alongside His sheep. If we ask, “How does He know?” Well, His compassion for us comes from His experience of being a lamb Himself too– (*John Baptist calls him that twice in John 1:29 & 36*). He knows us, and feels with us, because He was once a Lamb! What a gift! Again, His heart is in His sheep’s care., because He gives us even His own self. That is Eucharist! More than personal even Jesus’ shepherding care is eternal. There’s no end to it.